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SHORTGRASS COUNTRY by Monte Noelke

Recruiting enough men to mark lambs posed the biggest problem. Pressure was high to finish a pasture before the sheep were kept up so long that lambs were weaned from their mothers. In my apprehension to put together a crew, I over-reacted, or rather overstepped myself.

In the uncertainty of whether the help who promised to come were going to keep their word, I promised a friend of mine if he'd lend out his yard man, I'd pay him back by taking his place when the worker had grave business problems in Mexico, or serious illness in the family. Not thinking or remembering at this time that the particular gardener looked after a linear footage of gladioli and tulip beds longer than the south fence of my horse trap, including trimming an acreage sprigged in St. Augustine grass that took a day to make one lap following a self-propelled mower set on high gear.

Once I realized the gravity of the commitment, I found myself making up excuses to call and see how ol' Juan was doing. There were comments like, "He did make it back Monday from Del Rio, didn't he?" or, subtle small inserts such as, "Sure hard on a man Juan's age to work on these hot afternoons."

Roundup counts ran way high over previous spring gatherings. The warm, wet winter kept livestock healthy; the extra handouts of sacked goods worked extremely well, supported by winter grasses and an early weed crop.

But probably the biggest factor in the success rested in the small muster of men on horseback. Between the last shearing and the first cow work, the mesquites leafed out, shading and hiding about 70 percent of the surface and all of the horizon of the pastures. However, such a small crew makes such a minute amount of noise dispersing and regrouping, the sheep or cattle were often drifted together in the thickets before they knew what was happening. Men and horses also are quieter and calmer on a drive. And last of all, the cool weather broke in our favor, especially in the case of capturing the full wooled ewes out grazing, instead of slumbering under a bush...